Committee: Peloponnesian War: Delian League Crisis

Topic: 431-401 BCE: Athens vs. Sparta

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Dear Delegates,

My name is Rahul Gupta. It is my honor and privilege to welcome all of you to the tenth annual Sidwell Friends School Model UN Conference and to be serving as co-chair to the Peloponnesian War Committee at SFSMUN X. First, a little about myself…I am currently a junior at Sidwell Friends. I’ve been participating in Model UN (in some form or another) for five years, but I also don’t mind good puzzles, books, Monty Python sketches, and so forth.

My name is Sameer Shaikh, and I am thrilled to be serving as co-chair with Rahul. I am a sophomore at Sidwell Friends, and have been participating in Model UN throughout middle school and high school. I staffed on SFSMUN last year, but this will be my first year chairing a committee.

This crisis committee will explore the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which took place between 431 and 404 BCE, and how the Delian League fought against the Spartans and their allies for hegemony in Greece. We expect all delegates to be knowledgeable about the relevant background and history and work effectively to solve the various challenges in committee.

Good luck to everyone, and we look forward to a fantastic committee.

Regards,
Rahul Gupta and Sameer Shaikh
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**Historical Background and Context**

For the first fifty years of the 5th century B.C.E (from 499 to 449 B.C.E), the Greek city-states fought off a series of assaults by the mighty Persian Empire, preserving their liberty and driving the Persian forces out of Europe. The Persian invasions united the otherwise fractious Greek political world: it took an allied effort to defeat the Persians.

Political divisions in Greece centered around two great city-states and their respective allies: Athens and Sparta. Both played a significant role in the Persian Wars, but towards the end of the conflict, the Athenians at the head of a voluntary alliance known as the Delian League took the lead in carrying on the campaign against Persia to its long drawn out end. Through the conflict, the Delian League grew in size and power, and soon rivaled the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta. In the years after the Persian Wars, the Greeks were divided into two great alliances that regarded each other with great suspicion.

**Sparta and the Peloponnesian League**

The older alliance was led by Sparta, a state that had conquered its neighbors centuries before the Persian Wars, and reduced some of them to a state of slavery. These slaves, known as helots, farmed the land and provided the labor that permitted Sparta to flourish. They outnumbered the Spartans by nearly ten to one, and presented a perpetual threat of internal rebellion. To ensure their control over the helots, and maintain their overall prowess, the Spartan society was organized around military service, with the needs of the state put above individual or family needs.

Internally, Sparta was organized uniquely as a mixture of a monarchy, an oligarchy and a democracy. The Assembly, consisting of all Spartan men over 30, constituted the democratic part, but was largely a forum to hear grievances, with little power. A system of two kings represented the monarchic component. The Gerousia, a council of 28 men over the age of 60 selected from privileged families, represented the oligarchic element. Finally an ephorate consisting of 5 “ephors” served to check the powers of the Kings, playing a complex and essential role, particularly in foreign affairs. The ephors summoned and presided over the Assembly, and had the power to bring charges against the Kings. They also received foreign envoys, negotiated treaties and ordered military campaigns, once war was declared.

In the 6th century, B.C.E., the Spartans developed a system of perpetual alliances to safeguard their society from both internal and external threats. The allies were required to send soldiers at Sparta’s request and serve under Spartan command. This alliance, known as the Peloponnesian League, made Sparta the first great power in Greek history. The alliance was a loose and varied association. Some of its allies were small and easily controlled, whereas a few others, like Corinth, were remote and large and often operated autonomously. Despite the strength of this alliance, and its military culture, Sparta was usually reluctant to go to war. Their chief restraint was fear that the helots would take advantage of the army’s pre-occupation in a long foreign conflict, and rebel.

**Athens and the Delian League**

Athens’ was a city state in a region called Attica which it had, over decades, united under its control. All communities in Attica were considered part of the Athenian city-state and all of their free, native-born inhabitants were citizens of Athens on an equal basis. The lack of internal or external pressures and a non-violent history contrasts with Sparta, and explains Athens emergence in the 5th century B.C.E as the world’s first democracy. All adult male citizens directly participated in the government through the Athenian Assembly. The Assembly was the seat of sovereignty in Athens, meeting at least 40 times a year and holding open debates. The Assembly approved treaties and declared war.

Athens power and prosperity depended on its maritime empire centered around the Aegean Sea and its islands. The empire began as a voluntary alliance of Greek city-states, but gained formality when Athens was asked to take the lead in continuing and finishing the wars against Persia. The alliance, known
as the Delian League, gradually ceded more and more control to Athens. Members gave up their own fleets, and instead gave money to Athens to build and maintain a large navy, which became the biggest and best ever known in the world. The Athenian fleet enabled trade to flourish even further, including far into Europe, which in turn made Athens prosper. That prosperity was used to build and glorify their city, further grow their navy and expand their empire. When the Athenians built walls to surround the city, connected via a long walled path to their fortified port at Piraeus, they appeared both powerful and invulnerable.

The most important offices in the Athenian state were those of the Ten Generals, who were simultaneously military men and elected politicians. They did not form a government, since the Assembly was the government, but exercised influence informally. Occasionally, a general would gain such a reputation and influence to become effectively the leader of Athens as a matter of fact, despite lacking formal authority. Cimon had such a position in Athens from 479 to 462 B.C.E, and after his departure, Pericles achieved an even greater level of success over a longer period. For nearly three decades leading to the Peloponnesian War, Pericles exerted unrivaled influence over Athens, despite having no formal power. The best description of Athens on the eve of the Peloponnesian War was that it was a democracy led by its first citizen, Pericles. The Athenians followed his lead, and the rest of the Delian League followed Athens.

**Origins of Rivalry Between Sparta and Athens**

The rivalry between Sparta and Athens developed in the decades after the Persian Wars, as the Delian League grew in power and wealth, and transformed into the Athenian Empire. Sparta, which had long held sway as the dominant military force in Greece, became naturally suspicious and wary of Athens’ rise. That suspicion grew when Athens elected to build seemingly impregnable walls to surround their city and port, after the defeat of the Persians, and soon manifested itself in an internal crisis. A major earthquake caused havoc in Sparta and led to a revolt by the helots. Unable to extract the helots from their mountain stronghold, the Spartans called for help from their allies. At the time, Athens and Sparta were allied through the Greek alliance against the Persians, so the Athenians sent soldiers to help. Shortly upon arrival, however, the Athenians alone were asked to leave, because the Spartans feared that they might switch sides and lend aid to the helots to destroy Sparta.

The incident had dramatic impact in both states. In Athens, Sparta’s insulting treatment of the Athenian army resulted in the fall of Cimon, the powerful Athenian general who had urged friendship with Sparta in the years after the Persian Wars. An anti-Spartan faction gained influence in Athens, forced a withdrawal from the alliance with Sparta, and forged a new alliance with Sparta’s bitter enemy Argos. Thereafter, when the Spartans expelled the rebellious helots, the Athenians settled them at a strategic site on the Corinthian Gulf. Finally, the Athenians menacingly intervened in a war between two of Sparta’s Peloponnesian League members, Corinth and Megara. Sparta had elected not to get involved to avoid choosing sides between its two allies. Megara’s geographical location held some strategic importance to the Athenians, both for economic and military reasons. But assisting Megara would amount to interference in a Peloponnesian League matter, and arouse the enmity of Corinth, a significant state in the League. The Athenians elected to assist Megara and accept it into the Delian League. This, in turn, sparked what became known, historically, as the First Peloponnesian War. The war lasted 15 difficult years, with neither side being able to deliver a decisive knock-out blow, and ending only when Megara abandoned the Athenian alliance to return to the Peloponnesian League. The war was concluded by the “Thirty Year Peace” ratified in 446-445 B.C.E.

The Thirty Years Peace formally divided the Greek world into two camps, and forbid members from switching sides. Neutrals, however, could join either side. And any dispute between the two sides was required to be submitted to binding arbitration. The peace terms recognized Sparta’s hegemony on
the land, and Athens’ on the Aegean sea. The peace treaty reflected the relatively even balance of power and constituted a fair compromise that both Athens and Sparta appeared committed to uphold.

Yet, minority factions in both camps remained dissatisfied. Some Athenians favored continued expansion and were leery of the militarism of Spartan culture. Some Spartans resented no longer being the sole hegemon, and feared Athens’ powerful navy and natural desire to expand its empire. The Corinthians maintained perpetual hostility towards Athens’ for its interference in their conflict with Megara, and looked for means to exact vengeance.

The Thirty Years Peace was tested in 440 BC when Samos, a powerful member of the Delian League, rebelled against Athenian leadership and secured the support of a Persian satrap. Soon other members of the alliance joined or threatened to join the revolt, and Athens faced an internal crisis. All eyes focused on Sparta, as its intervention would trigger a war, while its abstention would permit Athens to crush the rebellion. The Spartans called a meeting of the Peloponnesian League to discuss the possibility of war. Surprisingly, Corinth, Sparta’s most powerful and essential ally in any war against Athens, opted to vote for peace, ending the debate. The Athenians quickly put down the Samian revolt, and peace was maintained. The Samian crisis thus seemed to strengthen the prospects of long-term peace when a series of remote crises brought Athens and Sparta to the brink of massive war.

**The Three Crises**

The first crisis involved a conflict between Corinth and its colony Corcyra over Epidamnus, a small remote city founded by Corcyra. Although outside the Delian League, Corcyra threatened to seek assistance from Athens, and Corinth expected support from its ally Sparta. The Spartans remained aloof, as did the Athenians, at first, in order to maintain peace. Expecting to drub Corcyra, the Corinthians themselves suffered a surprising defeat at the hands of the Corcyraean navy in the first round of their conflict. Rather than negotiate a settlement, as pressed by Sparta, the Corinthians began to rebuild their fleet into a large navy. Alarmed, Corcyra sought alliance with the Athenians, and appealed to their sense of fear: if Corcyra fell, the Corinthians could would seize control of the Corcyraean fleet, and their combined navy (currently the second and third largest in Greece) would surpass that of Athens. For Athens, naval supremacy constituted the backbone of its empire and its military prowess – it could not permit the possibility of another power challenging it at sea. At the same time, there was some truth in Corinth’s argument that supporting a neutral (Corcyra) in a conflict with a member of the Peloponnesian League violated the spirit of the Thirty Years Peace. Moreover, allying with Corcyra increased the likelihood of a broader war, which Athens wished to avoid. After much debate, the Athenians offered the Corcyraeans a “defensive” alliance. That alliance was quickly called to the test, as the Athenians were forced to intervene by sending ships at the Battle of Sybota in order to prevent the Corinthians from destroying the Corcyraean fleet. Frustrated and even more deeply embittered against Athens, Corinth was determined to draw Sparta into the fray against Athens.

Athens now realized that a war with Corinth was highly likely. Perhaps in anticipation of that war, and with no other instigation, Athens ordered the city of Potidaea, a colony of Corinth, but also a member of the Delian League, to tear down its walls, dismiss Corinthian magistrates from office, and send hostages to Athens. The action was intended to separate Potidaea from Corinthian influence. Outraged, the Corinthians began to secretly aid the Potidaeans, and act that constituted a clear violation of the Thirty Years Peace. Moreover, they facilitated the Potidaeans’ secret appeals to Sparta for aid against Athens. While the Spartans had so far avoided open conflict with Athens, they were receptive to Potidaea’s entreaties.

Thereafter, Athens proceeded to take another provocative action. It issued a decree in 433 B.C.E. imposing severe trade sanctions against the citizens of Megara, another Spartan ally. It was Megara that had joined the Delian league and drawn Athens into the first Peloponnesian war against Sparta only to switch back and return to its alliance with Sparta leading to the Thirty Years Peace. Athens, stated reason
for the Megarian Decree is that the Megarians had desecrated sacred lands. The real reasons, however, were more complex. Megara had aided Corinth in its recent conflicts. By punishing Megara, Athens sought not simply vengeance, but the goal of deterring other cities from rendering further aid to Corinth. Pericles reasoned that Corinth could succeed in its vendetta against Athens, and spark a major war drawing in Athens and Sparta, only if other city-states joined it. If other states did join Corinth in challenging Athens, Sparta would eventually be forced to do the same, if only to maintain its leadership over the Peloponnesian League. Provocative as it seemed, punishing Megara was a means of trying to deter other city-states from sparking a greater conflict.

Although it may not have appeared as such, each of the foregoing steps taken by Pericles and Athens was a middle ground between belligerence and passivity. The defensive alliance with Corcyra, the actions against Potidaea, and the Megarian Decree each fell far short of aggressive military action. In each case, harsher alternatives were available, had Athens desired conflict or even been oblivious to the possibility of inciting a larger conflagration. Yet, these actions aroused passions within Sparta that could not be contained. Among those most angered were the majority of the ephors, the key individuals needed to launch a war.

The Spartan ephors made secret promises to the Potidaeans to encourage them launch a rebellion against Athens, and the Potidaeans, in turn, obliged. Corinth immediately seized upon that opportunity to support the Potidaeans and draw in other members of the Peloponnesian League into this effort, prompting Athens to send large force to lay siege to Potidaea. With Athens besieging a city that other Peloponnesians were aiding, and the Megarians, another Peloponnesian ally, being subject to economic war from Athens, Corinth had the basis it needed to press Sparta to summon a meeting of the Peloponnesian League in 432 B.C.E. in order to air grievances against Sparta, and make a case in the Spartan Assembly for war. Intended to be a deliberation among Sparta and its allies, the debate turned into an oratorical showdown between Corinth and Athens, when several uninvited Athenian representatives showed-up in an effort to dissuade Sparta from conflict. The Corinthians appealed to emotion and fear, presenting Athens as an inherently expansive power of great wealth against whom war was inevitable. The Athenians reminded Sparta of Athens’ wealth and record of military success, and urged the parties to seek arbitration of their disputes, as required by the Thirty Years Peace. It was an appeal to reason and deterrence. With passions flaring, the Corinthians seem to have succeeded: the Spartan Assembly voted to declare that Athens had broken the peace. It was essentially a declaration of war.

The Athenian Response

Despite the Spartan Assembly resolution, Sparta did not take any action for nearly a year. And in the interim, Sparta made several missions to Athens to explore ways to preserve the peace. After some rebuffs, the Spartans seized upon a specific formula to persuade Athens. They ensured no war would arise if the Athenians simply withdrew the Megarian Decree. The offer amounted to a serious concession on the part of the Spartans. Yet, Pericles persuaded the Athenians to hold their ground and continue to insist on arbitration. Unless he altered from that position, war would be inevitable.

Positions
- Athens: multiple members
  - Pericles: An advocate of democracy, and the defining statesman of Athens at time.
  - Cimon: An advocate of oligarchy and frequently opposed Pericles and Ephialtes.
  - Ephialtes: Advocate of democracy, attacked the areopagus (a bastion of aristocratic conservatism) and an ally to Pericles.
  - Alcibiades: Popular statesman and general in Athens, prone to changing positions -- and allegiances. Has no real moral principles or loyalty to any state.
  - Demosthenes: A famous general in Athens who has served the Athenian state loyally. He is courageous and cunning in battle but prefers to avoid unnecessary loss of life.
1 representative of the Athenian Assembly of the People
1 representative of the Boule - senior administrative body of Athens.

- Aegina: 1 member
  - Minted the earliest universally accepted coins in Greece, once a major maritime power before the rise of Athens. Now under Athens’s shadow, and therefore resentful of their lost power...

- Byzantium: 1 member
  - Possesses fertile land and extremely strategic location at the entrance to the Black Sea (especially for Athens, which imported much of its grain from the Black Sea). Byzantium paid high tributes to Athens, so some resentment towards the Athenians was not uncommon there.

- Paros: 1 member
  - Located on extremely important shipping routes between mainland Greece and Asia Minor and famous for the quality of its marble. Often involved in conflicts with Naxos, but no indications of resentment towards Athens.

- Corcyra: 2 members
  - Possesses significant naval power, generally kept to its own affairs (stayed out of Persian Wars). Generally involved in conflicts with Corinth on the Peloponnese, and some tensions between oligarchic ruling class and common people, but an important ally to Athens due to the trade routes it controls.

- Naxos: 2 members
  - Largest island in Cyclades island chain of Central Aegean, once a major regional power and became extremely wealthy due to its export of marble and other goods. Rebelled against Athens in 467 BCE, but rebellion was crushed and island was reduced to semi-dependent status. Resentment of Athens still lingers...

- Samos: 2 members
  - Maintained a naval fleet with help from its ally Corinth, home of scientists / mathematicians Pythagoras and Aristarchus. One of the founding members of Delian League, but attempted to rebel in 440 BCE and was defeated, brought under control of a pro-Athenian elite.

Questions to consider:

- What short-term tactical actions should the Delian League take to counter Sparta and the Peloponnesian League? Or should the Delian League not aggressively try to resist Sparta and instead counter with conciliatory action?
- What long-term strategic actions should the Delian League take to counter Sparta? Are there other military threats the League faces?
- What political / diplomatic actions should the Delian League take to ensure peace and prosperity for members? Is conflict with Sparta inevitable?
- Does Athens have too much power in the Delian League? Are reforms to its structure necessary?

Works Consulted:


